27 October 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Morning Meeting of 27 October 1969

DDCI was in the chair.

DD/I reported that the Director received a request from Dr. Kissinger for an assessment of recent Soviet and Chinese reactions to the U. S. readiness exercise and added that the finished response will be in hand by the close of business today.

DD/I commented that as yet there is no scheduled NSC meeting this week.

Godfrey noted that Lebanon is relatively quiet.

By pointing to the item in today's CIB, Godfrey noted that the reported Soviet reaction to U. S. naval presence in the Mediterranean was the Soviets reacting to Exercise [redacted]. However, he added that there has since been some shift in U. S. naval presence in [redacted] which might be reflected in future reporting.

Carver reported that low-level photography suggests the ChiCom road building survey in Laos is further extended than we thought earlier. DDCI questioned whether Souvanna Phouma is opposed to attacking certain areas held by the ChiComs, and the DD/P and Carver briefed on the evolution of Souvanna Phouma's ground rules.

Carver noted that he will be meeting for the first time with Larry Lynn's subcommittee on Vietnam. He added that he will also be seeing Deputy Secretary Packard today.

Maury reported that Chairman Mahon has indicated that the main topics of interest for our scheduled appearance Wednesday before the House CIA Appropriations Subcommittee are materials on Soviet and ChiCom weapons. He added that some questions pertaining to our budget are anticipated, and the Executive Director noted that either he or [redacted] will attend.

Maury noted receipt of a letter from Wilfred Rommel, Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget for Legislative Reference, requesting certain actuarial data in connection with our draft retirement legislation.

[redacted]

DD/S&T noted that on 26 October the Soviets test fired an SS-9 with multiple re-entry vehicles. He added that they received some calls over the weekend expressing concern over what this Soviet testing might mean in terms of the projected SALT talks.

DD/S&T briefly highlighted the work of the Strategic Intelligence Panel, which met last week. He commented that they were somewhat critical of our Estimates in terms of their clarity. Bross noted a similar concern on the part of PFIAB (Admiral Anderson), and considerable discussion followed on how best to package the material contained in Estimates in order to effect clarity.

Bross queried about what happened to the notion that [redacted] will head up a NET Estimate Group in DDR&E. D/ONE commented that he thinks this is still in the cards, but DD/S&T noted the possibility that this whole task might go to ARPA. Bross suggested that DD/S&T query [redacted] on this matter at some appropriate time.

DD/P mentioned that they are doing an annotation of the Sunday New York Times item by Henry Kamm, "U. S. Runs a Secret Laotian Army." He noted that this was the first in a four-part series, the second of which is in today's Times.

DD/P noted that he will be meeting with WSAG on Lebanon tomorrow and does not know whether this will conflict with the scheduled 303 Committee meeting.

[redacted]

L. K. White

NEW YORK TIMES
26 OCT 1969

U.S. Runs a Secret Laotian Army

Magnum

A U.S. officer supervising the training of soldiers early in period of United States military involvement in Laos.

In Washington, a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee is meeting in closed session to investigate the obscure war that has been raging for years in the kingdom of Laos. The following article is the first in a series by correspondents of The New York Times giving the background of what has been called the "twilight war" in the remote interior of Laos.

By HENRY KAMM

Special to The New York Times

VIENTIANE, Laos, Oct. 20—The United States maintains and largely controls an army of irregulars in Laos.

The force, known as the Armée Clandestine, is made up mainly of Meo hill tribesmen from the north. It has borne the brunt of the fighting against North Vietnamese intruders and Pathet Lao rebels. Its military successes in recent months reversed a deterioration of the situation that had brought Laotian and American officials to the edge of despair in midsummer.

The big question in Laos now is whether the North Vietnamese, now estimated at 50,000 strong, will return to the attack in the weeks and months to come and whether the clandestine army, aided by continuing heavy American aerial bombing, can stem the tide once more.

At a time when the 15-year-old American commitment in Laos is a subject of debate in Paris and of critical scrutiny in the Senate, United States officials here make it clear that they consider the clandestine operations justified. They cite the results so far, the alternatives—from abandonment to the committing of Thai or even American forces to combat, all of which they deem even less desirable—the minimal use of American men and the contention that the operations are far less costly than the expense of maintaining a regular division in combat in Vietnam.

Size and Cost Unclear

There are no estimates available on the cost of the clandestine army. Its size—like most statistics in a country where vagueness is a way of life—is also uncertain. Those who are in a good position to know put the total at 40,000, of whom some 15,000 are more or

Three weeks of discussions with the best-informed American, Laotian and other officials, all of whom decline to be publicly identified, produce a fairly comprehensive picture of the clandestine army, rounding out sketchy details that have become known in the past.

It was organized and is led by Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, a 40-year-old former sergeant in the French colonial army. It is armed, equipped, fed, paid, guided strategically and tactically, and often transported into and out of action by the United States.

More than any other Laotian, even the Premier, General Vang Pao represents American hopes to stabilize the military and political situation in Laos—threatened, like South Vietnam, by North Vietnamese infiltrators and by Hanoi's internal ally, in this case known as the Pathet Lao.

In the American view, the Meo role is dictated by North Vietnamese disregard of the 1962 Laotian neutrality agreements. Hanoi's forces, the Americans say, continue to pour through Laos along the Ho Chi Minh Trail of roadways into South Vietnam.

The closest secrecy surrounds the presence of Americans and other foreigners, including Thais, engaged by the Central Intelligence Agency for the secret force. Estimates range from 50 to several hundred, but few people know the total.

Some Americans Killed

Americans are instructed not to expose themselves to combat operations in order to maintain the secrecy of their presence. However, the contention of American officials that no C.I.A. agent has been killed by enemy bullets was contradicted by Laotians close to General Vang Pao.

The sources reported that the great loyalty of Americans who work with the Meos had often moved them to stay with their men and had cost the lives of a number of C.I.A. men.

The intelligence agency is known to exercise control over the clandestine army. It keeps the Laotian High Command and Government advised, but its relations with the clandestine force are in effect direct and frequently pass outside regular channels.

The principal reason is described as a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the Laotian Army as a fighting force and in the efficiency and incorruptibility of officers and officials who would handle American supplies.

The principal reason is described as a lack or confidence in the effectiveness of the Laotian Army as a fighting force and in the efficiency and

continued

Approved For Release 2005/11/23 : CIA-RDP80R01284A001800120041-0

incorruptibility of officials who would handle American supplies. By contrast, the Americans say, the Meos are reliable fighters whose traditional hostility to all intruders on their territory can be turned to advantage.

In addition to the C.I.A., the large staff of American military attachés at the embassy counsels the guerrilla units in the field. Officially there are more than 70 assistant attachés under the command of Lieut. Col. Edgar Duskin, but unconfirmed reports put the total higher.

Families Also Get Supplies

The United States Agency for International Development channels food and supplies to the Meo fighters and their families. The flow of military goods is handled through the Requirements Office, a branch of the aid agency.

Two private airlines, Air America and Continental Air Services, are under contract to the aid agency but are believed to be controlled at least partly by the C.I.A. Their planes and helicopters provide the essential means of transport for the clandestine army men and their dependents in this mountainous and largely roadless kingdom.

General Vang Pao wears three hats.

As a major general in the Laotian Army he is commander of the Second Military Region, the area of the heaviest fighting, including the vital Plaine des Jarres, which he recaptured last August and September after five years of enemy occupation of the area.

As chief of the clandestine army he controls the most effective fighting force in northern Laos, an area including three of the country's five military regions and much of a fourth.

Finally, through the power position he has achieved as a result of heavy American support and of his own personal dynamism and military ability, he has wrested leadership over the Meo from other contenders.

The minority of Meos, a short, tough Montagnard people most of whom in Laos are believed to be anti-Communist, was estimated by General Vang Pao at a recent meeting with newsmen to number 450,000; non-Meos put the total at 250,000. The population of Laos is estimated at three million in an area slightly smaller than that of Oregon.

The more or less full-time Meo force of 15,000 is deployed freely and fights few defensive actions, preferring to disperse before superior strength and regroup for counterattack.

The remaining members of the fighting force are more bound to their immediate regions, their family ties and the raising of the principal Meo [illegible] become full-time fighters when their region is threatened.

In addition, all male Meos, from the very young to the very old, fight when their villages are attacked and form a sort of home guard under General Vang Pao's command.

The general's operational base is at Long Cheng, a top-secret camp and airstrip south of the Plaine des Jarres that is accessible only to authorized Laotians and Americans.

Six miles to the north is Sam Thong, the town that serves as his headquarters as commander of the Second Military Region. Militarily it is only a show window, a place for the general to receive visitors who are not supposed to know of the clandestine army and the American support for it.

Bustling Refugee Center

At Sam Thong the visitor is shown a bustling refugee center sustained by United States aid, where Meos wearing their traditional black costumes brightened by multicolored sashes, scarves and headgear await resettlement.

Some are indeed refugees, displaced either by enemy action or by American bombing. Others are soldiers who are being moved from one hilltop to another. (Meo fighting men seldom travel without their wives and children, and moving a combat unit usually means resettling the families.)

Long Cheng is strictly military and strictly clandestine. The planes and helicopters that take off from the Sam Thong airstrip when visitors are about carry refugees and rice. Those at Long Cheng carry soldiers, arms and ammunition to battle.

Long Cheng is also the center of a far-flung radio network that links the irregulars.

The Meo forces include many small groups in regions largely under enemy control, some inside and some outside the traditional Meo homelands. They perform reconnaissance on North Vietnamese activities and, in the northernmost region, Chinese activities as well.

During the American bombing of North Vietnam, the forces of the clandestine army manned observation posts on both sides of the frontier, protected highly sensitive American installations that guided the attacking planes and participated in many rescues of American pilots.

Guided Planes to Target

The principal American-equipped and partly American-manned stations connected with the bombings were at Phathi and Nakhang. Phathi, on a peak in the northeast, had radar and navigational beacons that guided planes to their targets.

Both stations also served as advance bases for rescue helicopters. Observation teams used radios and sometimes mirrors to flash the location of downed pilots to Phathi or Nakhang. Long Cheng, se[illegible]t on their hazardous missions.

In 1965 a Laotian colonel named Thong, one of the few non-Meos close to General Vang Pao, was mortally wounded by sniper fire in northern North Vietnam not far from the Chinese frontier when a helicopter that had picked up a pilot was about to take off. He died in an American hospital in Thailand.

Colonel Thong was posthumously awarded the American Silver Star; he was one of two or three Laotian soldiers to receive a United States decoration. Because of the secrecy of the operations involved, the awards have not been announced.

Another Laotian decorated by the United States, also posthumously and secretly, was Capt. Ly Leu, a nephew of General Vang Pao. When the young captain was shot down last year he was considered the ace of the Loatian Air Force., which flies obsolete propeller-driven American T-28 training planes converted to bombers.

Role Dates From Early 50's

Although the American connection with the clandestine army is never officially acknowledged, Americans are known to have helped organize, train and equip the Meo fighters since the early nineteen-fifties.

The task was performed by Army and C.I.A. men until the Geneva accord of 1962, which provided for Laotian neutrality and barred all but French military advisers. The Central Intelligence Agency then took over the functions, sometimes using officers who had resigned from the Army so they could continue their tasks.

According to Laotian sources, three agency representatives are attached to General Vang Pao at Long Cheng and a few dozen others work in the field with his forces. Even people who see them frequently know them only by fictitious first names or nicknames.

In addition to the Americans, the sources said, a number of Thai citizens in the employ of the C.I.A. provide tactical guidance. Some Filipinos are reported to be active in the maintenance of equipment and South Vietnamese are said to be radio men.

Americans are running the airbase facilities at Long Cheng and Sam Thong and the more advanced communications equipment. No reliable estimate of their number is available.

As for casualties, American officials concede that intelligence agents have been killed when planes have crashed.

Pilots in the Middle

The most extensive direct involvement of Americans in military operations is that of the pilots who fly the transport planes, [illegible] and helicopters to the hundreds of landing strips that dot the countryside.

According to the United States Embassy, Air America employs 207 Americans and Continental 73. Both also use considerable numbers of Laotian, Thais and Filipinos, but not as pilots.

With the Meos the planes carry some of their belongings, and often the bundles and boxes contain the Meo's favorite cash crop, opium. This is known to the C.I.A. and it does not make officials happy, but they say that to crack down seriously would create a morale problem among a hard-pressed but resolute people.

The Meos' morale and General Vang Pao's prestige were badly shaken when a North Vietnamese offensive early last year resulted in the loss of more Meo territory and heavy casualties. The installations at Phathi and Nakhang were overrun but had been destroyed before the enemy arrived. According to unconfirmed reports, two Americans were killed at Nakhang.

The United States also heavily underwrites smaller clandestine forces in southern Laos. They consist of so-called special guerrilla units and trail-watchers.

Keeping the Paths Open

The special units have the principal mission of maintaining access to the Ho Chi Minh and Sihanouk Trails for the agents who monitor traffic moving on those supply lines from North Vietnam and Cambodia to the Communist forces in South Vietnam. Many of the guarrillas are based in a region north of the Cambodian border known as the Plateau des Bolovens.

The trail-watchers radio information about convoys and coolie caravans on the network of jungle and mountain paths. The C.I.A. station at Udon, in northeastern Thailand, then activates planes at Ubon, close to the Laotian border.

Occasionally guerrilla teams, American Special Forces units from Vietnam or C.I.A. teams are assigned the perilous mission of attacking installations or supply depots alongside the trail. Casualties are said to have been heavy.

In the south the Central Intelligence Agency works with the commander of the Fourth Military Region, Maj. Gen. Phasouk Somly, a tough and efficient soldier. General Phasouk's forces are more fully integrated than are General Vang Pao's into the Laotian command. About a thousand of his special units were the main driving [illegible] attack last month

continued

that led to the temporary capture of Muong Phine, an important center just west of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Independent Meo Fierce as Fighters

The Meo tribesmen are fiercely independent warriers who live in the mountains of northern Laos.

Like the Lao, the dominant ethnic group, the Meo migrated from southern China. While the Lao, who form half of the population of three million, are descendants of Thai peoples who moved south between the 6th and 13th centuries, the Meo, also known as Miao, arrived in the mid-19th century.

The Meo speak a language that is part of the broad Sino-Tibetan language family, which also includes Thai and Burmese. Three million Meo still live in southern China and several hundred thousand in North Vietnam.

While the Lao are plain-dwellers and rice eaters, the Meo live only at altitudes above 3,000 feet and often grow corn in preference to rice.

The basic religion of the Meos is ancestor worship combined with animistic beliefs. The Lao believe in Hinaya Buddhism, the dominant faith of Laos.

During the Indochina war after World War II some of the Meo allied themselves with the Vietnam-backed Pathet Lao and a few with the French. In recent years their affiliation has shifted to the Laotion Government forces.

Laos War: At a Glance

THE COUNTRY—A landlocked state about the size of Oregon, surrounded by Communist China, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma. Population, estimated at three million, includes Lao, Thai, Meo, and other ethnic groups with little sense of national identity. Natural resources unsurveyed; 85 per cent of people live by subsistence farming.

THE TROOPS—On the Government side, about 70,000 regulars, plus tens of thousands of guerrillas. On the pro-Communist side, about 45,000 North Vietnamese regulars plus 30,000 Pathet Lao insurgents. An unknown number of Americans operate in Laos or from Thailand. Nearly 20,000 Chinese Communist construction troops are building roads in northern Laos.

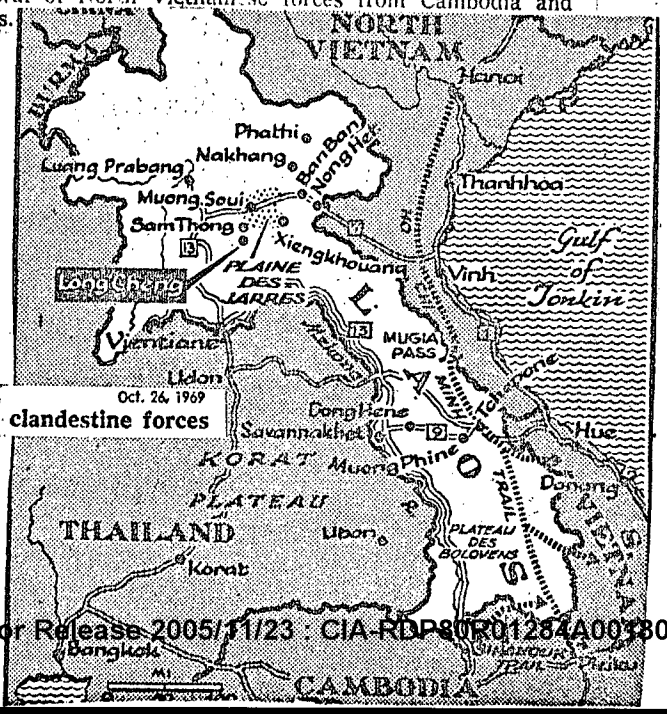
OBJECTIVES—Government, with American help, is trying to maintain its independence and the territorial integrity of the country. North Vietnamese, who have taken over most of the fighting on the Communist side, are trying to protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the road network over which their men and supplies move into South Vietnam. Some officials assert they may also be trying to place Laos under Pathet Lao rule.

TERRITORY HELD—North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao control area along Ho Chi Minh Trail, but in recent months have been driven eastward and northeastward off the Plaine des Jarres, which controls country's main roadways. In recent days, there have been reports of beginning of a pro-Communist counteroffensive in this area.

AMERICAN COMMITMENTS—Unclear. A Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee is nearing the end of its inquiry on this subject. Economic aid 1955-69: $643-million. Military aid, 1955-62: $128-million; since 1962, undisclosed.

INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS—In 1954, as part of the Indochina settlement reached at Geneva, Laos was declared neutral and the Pathet Lao were allowed to retain two provinces bordering on North Vietnam until they could be integrated into the political structure. In 1962, after civil war, a coalition government was established, a 14-nation conference in Geneva decreed that all foreign military forces were to leave Laos and not return. Foreign arms were prohibited except for conventional weapons necessary for national defense. Both sides contend that they have abided by the 1962 agreements; both are known to have broken them.

ROLE IN PARIS TALKS—North Vietnamese appear to view activities in Laos as part of drive against Saigon regime. Military pressure applied in Laos by either side may affect bargaining in Paris. President Nixon has said that a settlement of the war in Vietnam must include the withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces from Cambodia and Laos.



The New York Times Oct. 26, 1969

Long Cheng serves as the base of the clandestine forces

NEW YORK TIMES
27 OCT 1969

Meo General Leads Army of 40,000 Hill Tribesmen in War With the Communists in Laos

In Washington, a Senate subcommittee is meeting in closed session to investigate the obscure war that has been raging for years in the kingdom of Laos. The following article is the second in a series by correspondents of The New York Times giving the background of what has been called the "twilight war" in the remote interior of Laos.

By HENRY KAMM
Special to The New York Times

VIENTIANE, Laos, Oct. 20—A short, wiry Meo mountaineer who speaks French like a Foreign Legion drill sergeant and English like a foreign-born G.I. is the toughest commander on the anti-Communist side in the Laotian civil war.

Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, or V.P. as he is referred to by his American admirers here, is the recipient of large-scale direct American assistance to keep his followers, the Meo hill people, in the fight against the Communist-led Pathet Lao forces and their North Vietnamese allies, who have been trying to take over Laos for years.

His force, estimated at 40,000 men, is known as the Armée Clandestine.

Although American officials are not permitted to discuss the subject, their occasional lapses leave little doubt that the general's backing comes from the United States Central Intelligence Agency. This impression was sustained during three weeks of discussions with the best-informed Laotian and American officials here.

In a fashion characteristic of Laotian political and military figures, General Vang Pao frequently disclaims any connection with the United States despite its obvious role here in the protracted struggle. While United States jet fighter-bombers roar northward, he denies that American planes drop bombs in Laos.

At a recent meeting with newsmen, his discussion of his campaign to maintain control of the vital Plaine des Jarres was peppered with American military terms.

American support has not only made the 40-year-old General Vang Pao the most important general in Laos; it has also allowed a former French sergeant with six years' sporadic schooling to become the head of the Laotian Meo, whose number is estimated at 250,000.

He has in effect replaced in that informal and powerful position a more educated and experienced man, Touby Lyfoung. Mr. Touby, known as the King of the Meo, derived his power mainly from commerce—largely, it is believed, in opium.

General Vang Pao, in an effort to discourage the Meos from growing opium poppies, their favorite crop, replaces their losses with rice and other supplies from the United Sates.

He has further solidified his position by choosing his wives, estimated at five or six, from influential Meo clans. Polygamy is widespread among the Meo and other mountain tribes.

Family groups rather than bigger entities like king or country have the chief claim to Meo loyalties, and the general has also appointed seven or eight heads of leading families to a council he has formed around himself. He has given them houses in the private capital the C.I.A. built for him at his secret military headquarters—at Long Cheng, near Sam Thong, in the northeast—as well as generous monthly stipends and jeeps.

American money is providing the largesse that makes political power. But General Vang Pao's ability as a military leader, recognized by the French, and his flair for inspiring the Meos to fight despite heavy losses impel the United States to underwrite not only the clandestine army but also his political activities.

He is esteemed as one of the few generals in Laos who can be relied upon to use all weapons turned over to him to arm his troops instead of allowing them to disappear into a black market in which they have to be repurchased. And the weapons are turned against North Vietnamese troops, whose infiltration through Laos along the Ho Chi Minh Trail is considered a major asset to the enemy in South Vietnam.

Disneyland and Williamsburg

As a reward for his services, General Vang Pao paid an unpublicized visit—his second—to the United States a few months ago, from Disneyland to Colonial Williamsburg, which impressed him the most.

At Disneyland he was given a Zorro suit as a jest. He wore it recently, according to sources close to him, when he toured the Plaine des Jarres, the vital area his forces recently captured. The general, an officer in the Laotian Army in addition to his more important role as a guerrilla chief, relishes uniforms, rakish caps and medals, and he wears them all with panache.

General Vang Pao, who gesticulates in an agitated way when he speaks and is quick to anger when a question displeases him, has a gift for expressive language and expletives. Discussing the North Vietnamese the other day, he said in barracks-room French: "This is my room. If anyone wants to do his dirty business in my corner, I have to throw him the hell out, don't I?"

Cruelty does not shock General Vang Pao, whose people have been subjected to much of it by the Communist side. When a North Vietnamese prisoner said to a reporter in the general's presence that he had been tortured with electric shocks, the general commented casually, "He did not want to tell the whole truth, so he was forced a little."

The general travels to Thailand often. It is believed that he confers there with C.I.A. officials, but American officials say he goes to see his doctor.

On his first visit to the United States, he went to Fort Bragg, in North Carolina, where the Special Forces train.